REAP THE REWARDS OF GARDENING WITH CHILDREN

Gardening is a great way to involve the whole community in a fun, productive project, whether you’re in an urban or rural area. By planting and tending a garden, children learn how to appreciate the natural world around them. From the first stages of research and seed selection, through planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting, children develop a sense of pride and responsibility. And gardening is a great opportunity to help children practice math, writing, reading and science skills.

Plan before you start planting. Find out what to plant and how to take care of it. Take children to libraries and local greenhouses, or search online for gardening ideas. Encourage children to ask friends and neighbors about their gardening experiences.

A garden need not be extensive or have dozens of kinds of plants. Decide whether you want to plant a raised garden, a conventional garden with rows, or a container garden. A barrel, window box, or cut-in-half gallon jug will work well as a planter.

Whichever type of garden you choose, think about the climate and growing season before planting. Use sturdy, well-made tools and equipment. Shovels and hoes with short handles are easier for children to use than full-size tools. Be sure to give children real tools that are appropriate for their size. Toys are not intended for real gardening, and may be frustrating when children try to use them to dig up hard soil.

Use gardening as a learning experience. Here are some ways to help children learn more from their gardens:

Learning about Science and Nature
- Talk with children about the patterns and cycles they observe. What happens to plants when the weather gets hotter? How do the plants change when it rains?
- Have children guess what will happen to the plants as they grow. Write down their guesses, and compare the actual changes with their predictions.
- Learn the names of insects that appear in your garden. Which ones are beneficial, and what do they do? Which ones are harmful to your plants? What are the most effective and least dangerous ways to get rid of harmful insects?
- Consider a companion project like composting. Composting helps children learn the importance of recycling, and creates rich organic material to help your garden grow. Encourage children to guess what will happen to the food, leaves, and other materials in the compost pile. Have your child help turn the compost occasionally.

Reading and Writing
- Help children practice listening by describing what you see happening in the garden. Use new words to expand their vocabulary.
- Ask children to choose a specific plant, and draw or paint pictures each week as that plant grows. Help children write down descriptions of how the plant has
changed. Give them a digital camera to take photos of the garden, and attach the photos to their drawings and stories.
- Read children’s stories about gardening, such as “The Little Red Hen” by P. Galdone and “The Carrot Seed” by Ruth Krauss. Talk about the similarities and differences between your garden and the ones in the stories.

Math
- Count seeds with children. Have them estimate how many seeds or plants are needed to fill a specific area, and then count as you plant.
- Measure the correct distance between plants before planting them
- Mark the calendar for the date you expect seedlings to appear. Go back and compare the actual date of sprouting with the predicted one.
- Keep track of the height of your plants as they grow.

Gardening is a great way for children to learn through meaningful activities. The lessons children learn through gardening will build strong family connections, and will help them learn important skills in a fun way. You’ll be amazed to watch children’s sense of pride and accomplishment grow along with your garden!

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